

## *CHATSWORTH TRAIN WRECK: AUGUST 10, 1887*

During the late evening of August 10, 1887, a fifteen-foot trestle bridge on the Toledo, Peoria, and Western Railroad just outside of Chatsworth, Illinois, caught fire. It is unknown whether careless workers who had been burning weeds along the tracks earlier in the day accidentally started the fire or if sparks from a train had ignited the blaze. Regardless, by midnight the bridge was engulfed in flames, just as an excursion train carrying eight hundred passengers reached the crossing.

A popular vacation during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, excursion trains typically carried middleclass vacationers from rural locations in the Midwest to popular destinations in the East or West. The train passing by Chatsworth was heading to Niagara Falls, with a round-trip ticket from Illinois costing only \$7.50. The low cost for the excursion attracted a large number of vacationers, creating an unusually lengthy train consisting of two locomotive engines pulling over twenty passenger cars.

Although the train's engineer spotted the burning bridge on the tracks ahead, he was unable to stop the train in time. The first engine passed over the bridge with no trouble, but the bridge collapsed under the second engine, causing it to break off from the first and tumble into the ditch. The passenger cars followed, crashing first into the overturned engine and then into each other, each car slicing into the one before it. All told, eleven passenger cars careened into the ditch, with only the heavy Pullman sleeper cars staying firmly on the tracks. Eighty-one passengers were killed in the crash and another 372 were injured.

L. J. Haberkorn, owner and operator of the only hotel and restaurant in Chatsworth, and his wife had been scheduled to be on the Niagara Falls excursion but they decided to skip the trip at the last minute. When word reached town about the train wreck, Haberkorn led a group of civilian first responders to the site, arriving within an hour of the crash. As there was little water available to extinguish the burning wreckage, the rescuers used their bare hands to scrape up dirt to throw on the flames. Haberkorn asserted years later that the wreck was "not an accident but a case of criminal carelessness on the part of the railroad officials." He believed that, because of the number of passengers on the excursion train, there should have been a smaller pilot engine traveling ahead of it to make sure that the track was passable. Haberkorn lamented, "Had the railroad company done their duty, I would not be seeing in my mind these horrible sights all over again as I saw them that terrible night."